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Arms Talks Strategy: Bargaining Ranges Widely

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WASHINGTON, March 20 — As the Reagan Administration and the Soviet Union gear up their strategies for the current arms control negotiations, the bargaining goes well beyond the exchanges behind closed doors in Geneva to the political arenas of the United States and Western Europe.

News Analysis "This is going to be fought out in Western newspapers and legislative bodies," said an Administration official. "It will not be settled by the force of logic and reason in Geneva."

As American officials and foreign diplomats see it, the key will be which side is able to convince Western public opinion that the other is not negotiating seriously. If the Washington wins, Moscow may have to come around. If not, President Reagan will find himself trapped either into making concessions or looking like the obstacle to peace.

As of Tuesday, the Senate was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt in its 55-45 vote to approve a second batch of 21 MX missiles, the new 10-warhead ICBM's being deployed in Minuteman silos.

Belgian Action a Factor

Also Tuesday, the Belgian Parliament showed some skepticism of Soviet motives when it authorized the Government to deploy 16 new American medium-range cruise missiles on Belgian soil. Moscow's reaction was predictably swift and condemnatory.

The essence of the American strategy, as outlined by Robert C. McFarlane, the national security adviser, in a recent briefing, is to be flexible on strategic and medium-range weapons and to stress the futuristic nature of space-based defenses. In other words, get rid of existing threats now and worry about future problems later.

The Soviet Union, on the other hand, faces what officials on both sides judge as the more difficult task of convincing the public and leaders that defenses are dangerous and must be blocked now, as part of any agreement to reduce offensive weapons. Right or wrong, experts on both sides see this as a sophisticated argument that will be hard to sell publicly.

Setback for Moscow Is Seen

The virtually unanimous assessment of foreign and American experts is that Moscow has lost the first round. The British and West Germans have announced their support for Mr. Reagan's plans for a space-based defense system — as long as Moscow is unable to show how restrictions on research can be monitored and as long as future deployments of defensive systems are made the subject of negotiations.

The Soviet Union came back to the point over the weekend. First, its negotiator, Viktor P. Karpov, said on television that the United States was breaking an accord to stop the arms race in space along with limiting strategic and medium-range nuclear forces. This linkage had been agreed to by Secretary of State George P. Shultz and Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko.

Mr. Karpov's complaint was repeated the next day in Pravda, the Communist Party newspaper.

Mr. Shultz, according to American strategy, said Sunday that the Soviet Union's charges belied its expressions of seriousness and he, in turn, repeated accusations that the Soviet Union had violated existing arms pacts.

Whatever happens in the next few months, American officials do not expect Moscow to abandon its criticism of the space-based defense plans.

The Americans believe that if the Soviet Union's effort fails, it will switch its emphasis from space weapons to the issue of medium-range forces, the issue of concern to Western Europe.

By this analysis, the Soviet Union's strategy would then be to offer a deal that it believes the Western Europeans cannot refuse, and then use them to press the United States to make concessions on strategic weapons and on the proposed space-based defense system, popularly known as "Star Wars."

A possible Soviet approach was suggested by Arnold L. Horelick, director of the Rand-U.C.L.A. Soviet Studies

Center and former head of Soviet intelligence for the Central Intelligence Agency.

"The key issue is whether the Russians will be smarter and bolder than in the past," he said. "They have to make serious enough offers on offensive forces to convince people that a deal would be possible if not for the Administration's insistence on Star Wars."

"They have to find a way to do it that does not oblige them to put their best offers on offensive weapons on the table. Their problem is that they don't want to pay a lot on offense to get the United States to forgo defense, and they don't want to be forced to engage in all-out competition on defense."

Mr. Horelick's reckoning is that Moscow is unlikely to walk out on the talks again, as it did in December 1983. In retrospect, Soviet officials themselves felt that the walkout strengthened Mr. Reagan's hand.

For their part, American officials express confidence in their strategy for the next several months and as long as Moscow does not take the initiative with a new compromise proposal.

Meanwhile, the Americans expect to play a strong hand. On defense, this means persuading the Russians not to worry now. On strategic missiles and bombers, it calls for saying that any one of several paths to deep reductions would be acceptable, without specifying American concessions. On medium-range forces, it will mean reiterating the offer for equality of missiles in Europe, with Moscow allowed to deploy additional missiles facing Asia, a number about equal to British and French missiles.

Public expressions of optimism aside, Administration officials display no optimism about Moscow's going along. Their immediate concern is whether Congress will go along — with the MX missile and with the coming space-based defense plan.

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